

The Trust Biden Built with Israelis Doesn't Come with a Blank Check

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Articles & Testimony

The depth of the president's commitment greatly impressed Israelis, though a protracted Gaza war could test sentiments on both sides.

This may have been one of the most devastating weeks in Israel's history, but it also could mark a fundamental turning point in the Israeli public's relationship with US President Joe Biden. Israel has had emotional moments of connection before with foreign leaders at times of great shock. One came when Jordan's King Hussein [kneeled \(https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/17/world/a-time-to-mourn-king-hussein-comforts-israelis.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/17/world/a-time-to-mourn-king-hussein-comforts-israelis.html) before grieving Israeli families after a crazed Jordanian soldier killed seven Israeli schoolgirls. Another came when President Bill Clinton [met \(https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1996-book1/html/PPP-1996-book1-doc-pg451-2.htm\)](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1996-book1/html/PPP-1996-book1-doc-pg451-2.htm) with Israeli high school students after four suicide bombings, two of them on Tel Aviv buses, during a single nine-day period in 1996. These were not standard political meetings, but intimate encounters between a grieving society and a foreign leader who they came to see as a trusted friend for their words and actions. This week may be another.

Biden's three sets of White House remarks— [first \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/07/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/07/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel/) over the weekend, then a [forceful statement \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/10/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel-2/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/10/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel-2/) on Tuesday expanded upon in [remarks \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/11/remarks-by-president-biden-and-second-gentleman-douglas-emhoff-at-roundtable-with-jewish-community-leaders/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/11/remarks-by-president-biden-and-second-gentleman-douglas-emhoff-at-roundtable-with-jewish-community-leaders/) to American Jewish leaders on Wednesday—were effective for different reasons. They had an extraordinary and immediate impact inside Israel. A commentator on Israel's right-wing Channel 14 [apologized \(https://twitter.com/Yair_Rosenberg/status/1712154379036282993\)](https://twitter.com/Yair_Rosenberg/status/1712154379036282993) to Biden on-air for questioning his

commitment to Israel in the past, saying this was the “moment of truth.” **Huge billboards** (<https://twitter.com/UriKeidar/status/1712118034351931465>) sprung up on Tel Aviv’s Ayalon Highway declaring “Thank you, Mr. President” and quoting from his speech. Public reaction, judging from Israeli TV and social media, ranged from grateful to ecstatic.

First, Biden struck a clear and decisive moral stance. The President expressed genuine, palpable horror at the brutal Hamas terror attack and massacres in southern Israel. There was none of the usual diplomatic jargon calling on both sides to exercise mutual restraint. Rather, he said, Israel faces “sheer evil.” Never before had a US president equated Hamas with ISIS, going so far as to say the Hamas operation “in some cases exceeds the worst atrocities of ISIS.” Biden noted that the Israeli victims were “not just killed, slaughtered.” He took a moral position about Israel’s enemies, and wanted to be “crystal clear” that the US “stands with Israel.” Over the years, Israel has often felt—fairly or unfairly—its pain was being minimized on the altar of regional realpolitik, with morality replaced by diplomatic equivocation.

Second, Israelis could see Biden’s empathy on full display at a time of national trauma, with the president tearing up as he talked about the suffering of the victims. Moreover, his temperament is in sync with his commitments. Israelis like visceral leaders, who do not hide their passion. He immediately linked the horrors of the weekend to the history of atrocities against Jews, declaring that “this attack has brought to the surface painful memories and the scars left by millennia of antisemitism and genocide of the Jewish people.” This outpouring stands in sad and stark contrast to Israeli politicians, who are too often seen scoring political points against their adversaries even in times of adversity.

Third, the promise of genuine US wartime military assistance was the most vivid reminder that Israel is not alone in its moment of peril. It has become an article of faith in Israel that it will be left alone when it comes to Iran. Though sharp and important differences remain between the US and Israel regarding strategies in dealing with the Iranian nuclear program, suddenly Biden is warning Teheran and Hezbollah. He exhorted against exploiting this hour of grieving to start a regional war of missile-armed proxies with Israel with a single word: “don’t.”

The picture of the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier heading to the eastern Mediterranean was shown over and over again on television and Israelis immediately heard about the arrival of the first of many flights carrying military assistance. Biden says US aid includes ammunition, new Iron Dome interceptors and deployment of more fighter jets to the Mideast. For decades, Israelis have heard the slogans that American support for Israel was “unbreakable” and “unshakeable.” Yet actually seeing the commitment, not just hearing it, makes all the difference. For 75 years, Israel has been proud to be a country that defends itself by itself. Yet, having a US aircraft carrier show up in the region is like having the US cavalry right over the horizon.

Fourth, Israelis have been hearing for the last decade about the different wings of the Democratic party, particularly that the progressive wing is not supportive of Israel. Israelis believe Biden’s declarations of fealty to Israel could be politically costly for him, and yet he persists. Israelis can sense and appreciate a friend who stakes out a public position despite the political cost. Biden likes to remind people that he forestalled progressive calls to establish a ceasefire in Gaza at the UN Security Council in May 2021 before Israel was ready to do so. He pointedly refused. He didn’t want to moralize against Israel from the international diplomatic rostrum and was showered with criticism from his rival wing.

Fifth, Israelis see that Biden understands the DNA of Zionism. During his visit in July 2022, he arrived in Israel and declared one doesn’t have to be Jewish to be a Zionist. He declared, “the connection between the Israeli people and the American people is bone deep.” Biden has deepened his appreciation for Zionism’s meaning through 50 years of meetings with Israeli leaders. No Israeli leader today ever dealt with Golda Meir. His oft-told story that Meir told him Israel’s secret weapon is that “we have no place else to go” reflects his intuitive understanding of Jews’ historic isolation, and he understands the Jewish fear of abandonment due to age-old antisemitism. As he has often said, he

takes his grandchildren at the age of 14 to Dachau as he wants them to realize that “silence is complicity” and “hate never goes away.”

He understands a meta-lesson of Jewish history: stateless Jews are defenseless Jews. He told American Jewish leaders this week, “I truly believe, were there no Israel, no Jew in the world would be ultimately safe. It’s the only ultimate guarantee.”

Yet all of the above should not be misunderstood: Biden will not offer any Israeli leader a blank check during the Gaza crisis. Biden’s refusal to see Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for most of this past year reflected his belief that when it came to the judicial overhaul, Netanyahu was not acting in Israel’s best interest, but rather his own. In other words, being pro-Israel meant giving some tough love to an Israeli prime minister whom Biden saw as steering Israel away from the shared values that have bound Washington and Jerusalem together for decades.

In two of his statements this week, Biden said he urged Netanyahu to approach Gaza in keeping with the “rules of war.” This will not be easy when Hamas is a terror group whose only rule is that there are no rules.

In his book *The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden’s White House and the Struggle for America’s Future*, Franklin Foer writes that Biden’s advisors believed the president realized that his friendship with Israel enabled him to accrue political capital: “the trust he had deposited in the bank” towards attaining a policy objective. This may seem calculating: that he was “hugging Bibi tight” so that when the time came he would have the credibility to say—if only privately—that it was time to end the May 2021 war in Gaza.

I see it differently: Biden believes his bond is with the people of Israel, and thus he has a reservoir of support to occasionally tell its leaders when he thinks their government is veering away from Israel’s self-interest as he defines it. This is exactly what we saw on the judicial overhaul.

The Israeli public, Netanyahu and Biden may all have very different definitions of Israel’s self-interest during this crisis, which could lead to profound disappointments all around. Yet, critically accumulating a lot of trust between the White House and the Israeli public is an asset for both.

This Gaza crisis is likely to frequently test the Biden-Netanyahu relationship in the coming weeks, especially if the war goes awry. It would be a mistake for Netanyahu to take Biden’s commitment for granted: not because the US president doesn’t care, but because he believes he has spent a life demonstrating that he truly does.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations. This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-trust-biden-built-with-israelis-doesnt-come-with-a-blank-check/)

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